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**Author:** Andrew Tyler Jorn

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**Keywords:** disability; crip theory; Bataille; sovereignty; capitalism

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**Correspondence:** Andrew Tyler Jorn, e: [atylerjorn@gmail.com](mailto:atylerjorn@gmail.com).

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# Crip sovereignty: Bataille and the ethics of wasting away

Andrew Tyler Jorn<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Crip theory traces a line of flight away from liberal disability studies in the direction of an ethics of degradation which revels in and exploits disability's destabilising and disruptive potential. The danger of such an ethics, however, is that it risks romanticising disability and, in so doing, unintentionally underwriting ableist prejudices by continuing to index human worth to the capacity for self-determination, here in the form of a subversive "indeterminacy" and "heterogeneity". Georges Bataille's work can supplement crip theory insofar as it likewise joyfully affirms the scandalousness of degradation (uselessness, waste, etc.) while grounding this affirmation in an ontology of productive life *überhaupt* that shifts the responsibility for transgression from the individual onto society. For Bataille, more specifically, the point is that there is a categorical imperative to celebrate degradation as the *a priori* condition of a collective commitment to prevent global catastrophic suffering.


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## Introduction

The arrival of crip theory in the early 2000s had a paradigm-shifting influence on disability studies. Whereas the "new disability studies" that began to appear in the mid-1990s was focused mainly on exposing disability as a pervasive cultural trope and critiquing stigmatising representations and ableist ideology so as to promote "disability" as an identity to be deployed in the struggle for universal accessibility and equal rights, crip studies leaned into the unruliness and disruptiveness of disability, joyfully affirming its "anarchic potential...to destabilise the normative centres of society and culture".<sup>2</sup> Aligning itself with queer theory and adopting its modus operandi, an emerging

theoretical avant-garde owned and weaponised one of the most persistent epithets for disability in order to stage a more radical confrontation with the ableist neoliberal status quo. Not content simply to indict capitalism for stripping people with disabilities of their inherent value as human beings on account of their (perceived) economic liability, crip theory rather embraced this liability and promoted it as the source of disability's own value.

This is, to be sure, a gross oversimplification of the state of contemporary disability studies, albeit one which is nevertheless unavoidable. "Mature disability studies", Goodley notes, "have become increasingly eclectic", a dynamic and unwieldy bricolage cobbled together by a diverse array of affiliated schol-

<sup>1</sup>Japan International University, Tsukuba, Japan.  [orcid.org/0000-0002-3475-2855](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3475-2855).

<sup>2</sup>Goodley, *Disability Studies*, 194.

ars and writers adopting and drawing freely from a wide range of disciplinary orientations and theoretical models (Marxism, critical theory, psychoanalysis, cultural studies, genealogy, deconstruction...) and working within and across a loose and increasingly artificial spectrum of conceptually, geographically, and generationally distinct heuristic “models” (social, minority, cultural, relational...).<sup>3</sup> Given this state of affairs, it will have to suffice, for an article of this length and scope, simply to state that the issue under consideration here falls broadly within the remit of what has been called the “cultural model”, the overall aim of which is to expose disability as a ubiquitous imaginary trope that distils and reproduces prevailing and often oppressive societal norms. Nevertheless, this issue is not a “discursive transcendentalist” but rather a normative one; it concerns not the contingent fabrication of disability as a “discursive object” anchoring and legitimising institutionalised relations of control and domination, but rather the meaning and status of disability in and for a society driven by the politico-economic imperatives of growth and productivity and thus predicated on a prior interpretation of human nature in terms that anathematised disability as such (autonomy, independence, plasticity...) – or in a word, for modern capitalist society generally speaking. Disability, simply put, is an aporia for capitalism, and this fact has led inevitably to a practico-theoretical impasse which is exemplified by the tension between (liberal) disability studies and its (seemingly more radical) offspring, crip theory: on the one hand, disability can press for accommodation within a system that threatens disability itself with reduction to inert difference if not total eradication; on the other, it can insist on its radical incompatibility with this system even though its underlying values

could be positively mobilised to give people with disabilities more power over their own lives. In short: should disability refer to the mere physical and cognitive diversity of people who are all equally committed to the same fundamental project of the ceaseless expansion of the productive forces? Or should it instead serve as a privileged term for the refusal of that project and, by extension, the values that underpin it (or a certain interpretation of those values)?

It is with the aim of making some initial progress towards resolving this impasse that I propose to bring the work of Georges Bataille to bear on the subject of disability. Specifically, I suggest that Bataille’s concept of “sovereignty” as, roughly but technically, a partial and calculated commitment to uselessness and waste, can potentially reframe the problem in such a way as to release the tension by dissolving, or perhaps sublating, the impasse. What’s more, such a strategy has the added benefit of intimating how it might one day be possible to see how disability, so far from being a mere trifle that philosophy, desperate to demonstrate its enduring relevance, has latched onto in conspicuous fealty to the latest fads, has rather and from the beginning been what we might call, in Lacanese, the “*objet a*” of modern thought, the object-cause of its desire – an implacable and terrifying supermassive black hole at the heart of modernity around which the luminescent suns of freedom and reason all haplessly revolve and into which they inevitably tumble and disappear.

## The crip theory intervention

Describing how the modern understanding of disability was shaped by the ideol-

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 17. Garland-Thomson describes disability studies “as a ‘matrix of theories, pedagogies and practices’ with the potential to bring in many disciplines (interdisciplinarity) and break down disciplinary boundaries (transdisciplinarity)” (cited in *ibid.*, 11). Moreover, “[globally] disability studies is developing in glocal ways reflecting distinct regional contexts across the social sciences and humanities” (19).

ogy of liberal-democratic individualism, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues that societies founded upon the ideals of “self-government, self-determination, autonomy, and progress” are invariably haunted by the spectre of disability insofar as it “mocks the notion of the body as compliant instrument of the limitless will” and thus flouts the most basic categories of social identification.<sup>4</sup> The disabled figure exists to reassure people of what they are not (or not yet); it functions as a universal “not me” over and against which “the corresponding abstract cultural figure of the self-governing, standardized individual emerging from a society informed by consumerism and mechanization” can be set in relief and held apart.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, however, Garland-Thomson also suggests that the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 marked an important turn by shifting the mandated response to disability from one of restitution, which “assumes that individual bodies must conform to institutional standards” and then “compensates” them for their failure to do so, to one of accommodation, which calls for “restructuring the social environment to accommodate physical variety”.<sup>6</sup> This is important because while no disability advocate would be opposed to restructuring the social environment *per se*, it could be argued that such a mandate is predicated on the *prior* demand that *everyone*, people with disabilities as much as anyone else, be made to conform to an entire productive form of life – i.e., that the logic of accommodation translates to implicit endorsement of a society that “transforms necessity into virtue and equates productive work with moral worth, idleness with depravity”<sup>7</sup> insofar as it leaves no excuse for rejecting the ideas of

will, reason, autonomy, self-possession, etc. on which such a society is premised. In short, if capital can be compelled to make the requisite modifications, such that no one is “excluded from economic opportunities” and deprived of the “free agency, self-determinism, and self-possession” that constitute “the ennobling traits of the liberal American individual”,<sup>8</sup> then – it might be asked – on what grounds could people with disabilities refuse to concede to capital’s overall demands? And would this not amount to a form or measure of historical and social “progress”?

Crip theory takes a different approach. Whereas disability studies holds that “the physical differences of using a wheelchair or being deaf, for example, should be claimed, but not cast as lack”,<sup>9</sup> crip theory gambles on the potentially emancipatory reclamation and celebration of lack itself. As Elias explains, crip theory is a “political manifesto” that “illuminates the capacity of “ ‘those of us who fail, lose, get lost, forget, get angry, become unruly, disrupt the normative order of things, and exist and behave in the world in ways that are considered anti-normative, anticapitalist, and antidisciplinary’ ”, thus re-purposing lack as an opportunity for the creation of a new “politics of solidarity, of refusal, of unbecoming and unknowing, of the absurd”.<sup>10</sup> Goodley cites the concept of “crip time” as an example, which, in “contrast with the speed, haste and mobility of lives that work to succeed in a capitalist society”, is slow, halting, and disjointed. In this way, crip theory exploits the degradation and noncompliance of disability in order to subject the familiar habits and routines of late capitalism to practices that

<sup>4</sup> Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 42, 43.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Goodley, *Disability Studies*, 195.

might cause them to falter, short circuit, or break down altogether.<sup>11</sup>

Many disability scholars have drawn attention to the “persistent intertwining of disability with femaleness in Western discourse” from Aristotle onward, and in some ways the debate between disability studies and crip theory mirrors that within feminism “between those who would minimize differences to achieve equality and those who would elaborate differences to valorize the feminine”.<sup>12</sup> What Garland-Thomson has dubbed the “normate” or “cultural self” is essentially a masculine or, in Lacanian terms, “phallic” structure: as the “social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings”,<sup>13</sup> it is the source of a symbolic authority that allows the subject to fantasise about capturing “the Thing”, i.e., the errant, fickle desire of the “big Other”. There are, of course, any number of minoritarian groups (gays and lesbians, ethnic and religious minorities, unhoused people, migrants, etc.) whose abjection could serve to “shore up the normate’s boundaries”<sup>14</sup> in this way (“we” exist because we have “the Thing” that “they” lack); however, it is one of disability theory’s most provocative and far-reaching claims that, in the end, it is always *disability* that stands for the castrated, feminine other over and against which the masculine normate asserts its phallic authority. Disability is what Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell have called “the master trope of human disqualification”.<sup>15</sup> It is not merely other, but rather an “othering other”, a formal, “diacritical marker of difference that secures inferior, marginal, or minor-

ity status, while not having its presence as a marker acknowledged in the process”.<sup>16</sup> In Hegelian terms, we might call it “universal” in the sense that it functions as a sort of “master constitutive exception”,<sup>17</sup> meaning that irrespective of one’s minority status, one can always claim to have passed the threshold of humanness by distancing oneself from disability (including disabled people themselves, who can likewise recover a degree of humanity equivalent to the distance they can open up between themselves and those with more severe, often cognitive, disabilities). For the time being we shall have to set aside discussion of the way in which this formulation provides an answer to a question that has always eluded psychoanalysis, viz., that of the *content* of the Other’s desire (the phallus being the source of the “fantasy of autonomy”<sup>18</sup> which is denied to the feminine qua disabled). Here we simply note that the goal of disability studies might be described as a form of “traversing” this phantasy, i.e., as an acceptance of castration brought about through recognition that – to read Lacan with Garland-Thomson – “the big Normate does not exist”. The task for disability studies is to unmask disability as “the stranger in our midst”, to see how it contaminates the normate from within as a “cultural other [that] lies dormant within the cultural self”, and to deconstruct the “myth of wholeness” that privileges the heroic, self-reliant Emersonian individual whose “inviolate boundaries...enable unfettered self-determination”.<sup>19</sup> The whole point is to learn to accept “fragility, vulnerability, and disability as central to the human

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 21.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 6.

<sup>17</sup> Jorn, “The big Normate does not exist”, 63.

<sup>18</sup> Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 45.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 43–5.

<sup>20</sup> Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 180.



condition”.<sup>20</sup> Crip theory, in contrast, could be said to take the idea of an “othering other” in a stronger sense. If disability truly is the *master* trope of disqualification and the “baseline by which humanness is determined”,<sup>21</sup> then it will always and necessarily exist as the *structural* outside of a normate that no amount of accommodation can ever fully collapse; the inclusion of some will come at the cost of the “disablisation” of others *a priori*. In this case, crip theory opts for identifying with the outside itself – a gesture which amounts, to be sure, not to a rejection of accommodation *tout court*, but rather to a displacement of the site of genuine liberation.

This theoretical tension between disability studies and crip theory is exemplified in their respective concerns about “flexibility” and where the charge of flexibility should be levelled. For scholars like Emily Martin, David Harvey, and Robert McRuer, flexibility is a master signifier of neoliberal capitalism, routinely invoked (“flexible accumulation”, “flexible working hours”, “flexible contracts”...) to justify practices that have ushered in “the largest upward redistribution of wealth and other resources that the world has ever known”.<sup>22</sup> In other words, the value of accommodation, inclusion, etc. is not absolute but conditional upon what one is included within. This is why McRuer pushes back against Garland-Thomson’s “fanfare” over certain “realistic-mode” photographs of notable personalities with disabilities, such as US President Bill Clinton’s undersecretary of education and long-disability rights activist Judith

Heumann, which are described as “radical” and marking “a decisive cultural advance”.<sup>23</sup> For McRuer, the problem is that such realism recapitulates the progress narrative intrinsic to liberal individualism and construes this progress in terms of incorporation into a system whose logics of production, circulation, and consumption are premised on the total negation or eradication of disability, which is irremediably anathema to them. Moreover, it “mythologises” disability in Roland Barthes’s sense; by routinising and normalising disability, realism fetishises it by endowing it with new and seemingly self-evident values. Photographs of Heumann, or more recently of someone like Texas governor Greg Abbott, seem to cry out, as Barthes put it, “*Look at me: I am like you*”<sup>24</sup> – while quietly covering over the fact that Heumann’s boss eviscerated the US welfare system, leaving many people with disabilities without benefits,<sup>25</sup> or that Abbott, while serving as Attorney General, fought tenaciously against people who sued the state for ADA non-compliance.<sup>26</sup> For McRuer, such images inhabit the same ideological space as the marriage rights movement and the proliferation in the 1990s of the docile and reassuring figure of the “good gay” (monogamous, well-adjusted, accommodated...), which functioned both to foreclose critical discussion of deeper politico-economic exigencies (e.g., complaints about health insurance for gay and lesbian partners as opposed to institutional critiques of the corporate medical services industry) and thereby to “[obscure] the fact that we have already proliferated multiple queer alternatives to straight

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>22</sup> McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 17.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 177, 178.

<sup>24</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, 180 (italics in original).

<sup>25</sup> Fording and Schram, “The welfare reform disaster”, *Jacobin*. 28 Aug 2016. <https://jacobin.com/2016/08/welfare-reform-clinton-twentieth-anniversary-poverty>.

<sup>26</sup> “Greg Abbott Pushes to Block Disabled Texans’ Lawsuits against State”, *The Dallas Morning News*. 15 Feb 2014. <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/politics/2014/02/16/greg-abbott-pushes-to-block-disabled-texans-lawsuits-against-state/>.

<sup>27</sup> McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 82–84.

ways of relating”.<sup>27</sup> They are all reminders that “disability, and even disability activism, made to seem ordinary, can still be deployed in the service of normalizing dominant mythologies – in this case, neoliberalism, trickle-down economics, the Washington consensus”.<sup>28</sup> Against characters like Abbott – a strongman whose paraplegia is no barrier to his swashbuckling crusade against migrants, women, atheists, and “cultural Marxists” – McRuer holds up and invites consideration of other, more transgressive models, disturbing in different ways, such as the black American queer writer Gary Fisher and the self-styled “supermasochist” artist Bob Flanagan, both of whom rejected rehabilitative agendas in favour of conscious, counter-hegemonic strategies of self-perversion and enfreement. By testing the outer limits of a “will to degradation” which was almost certainly bound up with “some sort of religious and sexual ecstasy”,<sup>29</sup> Fisher and Flanagan crippled the homogenised, self-reflecting world of capitalism and pursued “alternative worlds and performances” that allowed for “a multitude of imaginary identifications across identities”.<sup>30</sup> In doing so, they “imagined crip existence as atypical and reached for something beyond the current order”.<sup>31</sup>

But if crip theory sees disability studies as too invested in flexibility on account of its preference for accommodation by the capitalist status quo (effecting change from within), disability studies counters that crip theory’s appeals to performativity and heterogeneity show that it remains wedded to a (liberal-individualist) notion of a flexible subject which is ableist at its core. Citing Susan Bordo’s argument that “the widespread notion of the body as

‘malleable plastic’ – ‘free to change its shape and location at will’ – obscures the physicality of the body in favour of a disembodied ideal of self-determination and self-transformation”, Siebers, without naming names, takes clear issue with those writers whose “emphases on ‘performativity’, ‘heterogeneity’, and ‘indeterminacy’ privilege a disembodied ideal of freedom, suggesting that emancipation from social codes and norms may be achieved by imagining the body as a subversive text”.<sup>32</sup> For one thing – and to return to the idea of disability as universal qua constitutive exception – these emphases “mimic the fantasy, often found in the medical model, that disease and disability are immaterial as long as the imagination is free”,<sup>33</sup> which, for Siebers, sits far too comfortably with the widespread view that people with cognitive disabilities, lacking the mental-imaginative athleticism required to appropriate their non-compliance and channel it into consciously transgressive acts of self-creation, are less free and thus less deserving of full citizenship. Failing “to throw off one’s physical disability because of mental defect”, i.e., by consciously exploiting its value as both shock therapy for normate society and material and occasion for increased pleasure through experimental self-transformation, “implies a caste system that ranks people with physical disabilities as superior to those with mental ones” and thus “encourages the vicious treatment of people with mental disabilities in most societies”.<sup>34</sup> For another thing, Siebers argues, these emphases bear little relation to the real lived experiences of most people with disabilities. In the case of Mark O’Brian, for example, who lived in an iron lung since he was six years old, exper-

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 135, 138.

<sup>30</sup>Sandahl, cited in *ibid.*, 139.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>32</sup>Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 74, 75.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 78.

iments with cross-dressing and gender fluidity later in life were less transgressive than simply recuperative. A disabled man like O'Brian starts from less than nothing; here normally "deviant" sexual practices indicate "the presence of sexual desire where none was perceived to exist previously", such that it is "only by appearing oversexed that the disabled man appears to be sexed at all".<sup>35</sup> Disability studies, then, asks crip theory to consider the *hard case*. It becomes more difficult to champion the emancipatory potential of the "supermasochism" of an artist with cystic fibrosis such as Bob Flanagan, who pounds a nail through his penis "because it's against nature; because it's nasty; because it's fun; because it flies in the face of all that's normal",<sup>36</sup> after giving equally serious consideration to "how overwhelming is the sexual frustration of some people with disabilities and how little their opportunities for satisfaction", as evidenced by "remarks by a paralyzed man named Johan: 'I can't do anything myself. I can't even masturbate. What can I do?'"<sup>37</sup> More problematic to validate and embrace the "somasochistic will to degradation" of Gary Fisher, the black writer with AIDS who fantasises about taking in "more piss"<sup>38</sup> from his doctor-master, in light of stories by people like Harriet McBryde Johnson who seemingly have no right to private urination even when visiting friends at an institution.<sup>39</sup> More questionable whether and to what extent a spastic colon can be reclaimed as a "celebratory moment of body politics"<sup>40</sup> after reading some disabled people's "gritty accounts of their pain and daily humiliations" surrounding assisted shitting.<sup>41</sup> If crip theory invites us to weaponise shame,

disability studies reminds us that some people are considered unworthy even to feel shame in the first place.

## Crippling Bataille: sovereignty and disability

If I have dwelt at such length on this tension between disability studies and crip theory, it is because I find all of the competing perspectives it contains to have merit. The state should mandate that accommodations be made so that people with disabilities can enjoy the same rights and opportunities as all other free individuals in a modern liberal market society; at the same time, disability – anarchic, disruptive, degrading, halting, inefficient – can and should scandalise this same society and threaten its most sacrosanct tenets and practices. The idea of a fully integral, complete, self-contained "phallic" normate should be exposed as a phantasy even while disability should not cease to exist as the formal outside – the feminine other – that props up the normate and delineates its boundaries. Realistic images of people with disabilities leading highly productive and happily conformist lives in a fully accessible neoliberal capitalist democracy are as ideologically suspect for their cloying deference to the status quo as transgressive images of more nonconformist figures engaging in acts of joyful resistance from the margins are for their reliance on a cognitive and existential (sometimes even physical) performatism that implicitly reinscribes and reproduces classic ableist tropes and prejudices. What, then, is to be done?

Georges Bataille is perhaps not the first

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>36</sup> McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 181, 185.

<sup>37</sup> Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 167.

<sup>38</sup> McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 138.

<sup>39</sup> Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 158.

<sup>40</sup> Goodley, *Disability Studies*, 194.

<sup>41</sup> Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 65. Again, it is a question of attending to lived experience, not of playing the game of "what's worse".



thinker that comes to mind as someone whose work is directly relevant to these issues. Despite appearances, however, Bataille's philosophy can be read in such a way that it opens up a general orientation within which these various positions can be brought together and made to achieve some kind of formal reconciliation. Indeed, and even more strongly, on such a reading this philosophy is one in which disability figures centrally, such that it is a question no longer of whether and how disability can have some relevance for philosophy but rather of how it is possible to do philosophy at all without thinking disability. In what follows, I will provide a sketch of this orientation which must remain, for the time being, provisional and schematic. In other words, the goal here is not an elaborate exegesis of Bataille's texts, but a recapitulation of the "logical" core – the essence or "concept" – of an *oeuvre* which might set the point of departure and the direction of such an exegesis. My claim is that we will have arrived at this essence when we can say that we have grasped the positive meaning, role, and value of disability for this *oeuvre*.

If one approaches Bataille primarily as a mystical writer with an "atheological" agenda pursued through certain lurid, idiosyncratic fixations on transgressive themes such as ritual, sacrifice, eroticism, and war, it quickly becomes apparent that the characterisation of disability endorsed by crip theory readily lends itself to a "prosthetic" retooling (in Mitchell and Snyder's sense) whereby its very impenetrability and absurdity render it a key to solving the "fathomless mysteries" of being itself.<sup>42</sup> Like crip theory, Bataille the mystic celebrates revolt and refusal rather than conformity and accommodation<sup>43</sup>; promotes self-evacuation or

"continuity" over the self-consolidation of discontinuous existence<sup>44</sup>; embraces suffering as a revelatory experience to be cultivated and made use of rather than laments it as a liability to be managed or cured<sup>45</sup>; insists on the need to retreat from workaday temporality and its servile obsession with the future to the prior, sovereign atemporality of "the moment"<sup>46</sup>; and seeks a form of Hegelian "absolute knowing" that would coincide with an ecstatic apophatic "unknowing". From this perspective, disability would be validated precisely in virtue of its inclusion within a chain of signifiers comprising the subordinate terms of a whole series of ancient oppositions: homogeneity and heterogeneity, appropriation and excretion, necessity and desire, spirit and matter, world and earth. Such a prosthetic deployment of disability, it goes without saying, is to be rejected at all costs insofar as it appropriates disability for a world-denying philosophy that, so far from challenging ableist ideology, rather reproduces and exacerbates it by "spiritualising" it. It keeps the onus on people with disabilities to create and assert their own value, and immanently ties this value to disability. Moreover, the content of this value consists entirely in the possibility of a form of auto-sanctification: if it remains incumbent upon people with disabilities to haunt normate society from outside, it is no longer in order to shock and terrorise this society but to withdraw from it; the moral imperative is not to carve out new modes of existence but to get "closer to God".

To be sure, mystical ecstasy lies at the heart of Bataille's project, but until we situate this experience in its proper theoretical context, we miss not only why mysticism is so important but also the true nature of the link between

<sup>42</sup>Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 61.

<sup>43</sup>"Sovereignty is revolt, it is not the exercise of power. Authentic sovereignty refuses..." See Bataille, *Unfinished System*, 96.

<sup>44</sup>"We are discontinuous beings...but we yearn for our lost continuity." See Bataille, *Erotism*, 15, 18–19.

<sup>45</sup>See, e.g., Bataille, *Unfinished System*, 14, 156–157.

<sup>46</sup>See, e.g., Bataille, *Accursed Share II/III*, 203–204.

mysticism and disability. To this end, we need to turn from the subject of mysticism *per se* toward Bataille's more mature reflections on what he calls "general economy", meaning the deeper energetical forces and principles governing the outward, visible phenomena of productive life. It is only in light of his theories about the global circulation of energy and the necessity of waste and exudation that Bataille's other, arguably more well-known views on religion, sacrifice, eroticism, etc. make sense and not *vice versa*, and for this reason his writings on general economy are the most appropriate place to stage an encounter with his thought.

The basic premise of general economy is simple enough: given a virtually infinite supply of solar energy circulating around the terrestrial surface, all living beings must use a portion of the available energy for growth and then squander the excess – the so-called "accursed share" (*la part maudite*) – in non-growth activity.<sup>47</sup> The human, too, insofar as it is understood as a living being *simpliciter*, is subordinated to this inviolable law of the cosmos. As a being endowed with *consciousness*, however – as a "subject", in more contemporary jargon – the human is something else entirely, a kind of cosmic breach or "laceration". On the one hand, consciousness refers to temporality and a concomitant awareness of finitude and necessity; in this sense, the subject is that being for whom it is both possible and desirable to *defer* free expenditure for the sake of an enhanced and artificial growth, to extend growth into the future by capturing the surplus and reinvesting it to the end of perpetually augmenting the surplus-generating apparatus itself.<sup>48</sup> In this way expenditure is converted into a means,

encumbered with a use-value it does not intrinsically possess; it is geared toward production, which for its part is reflected back into itself as the production-of-production. At the same time, however, consciousness is equally that which makes it possible for the subject to *enjoy* this very same expenditure which is always threatened with suppression in a way which is denied the rest of living nature. It is our human prerogative – the "substance of our aspirations"<sup>49</sup> – not simply to squander, but to squander exuberantly, gloriously, "sovereignly", in full knowledge of its value as enjoyment; the human "is the most suited of all living beings to consume intensely, sumptuously, the excess energy offered up by the pressure of life to conflagrations befitting the solar origins of its movement".<sup>50</sup> In sum, the subject is the being in whom the two natural instincts that regulate the flow of solar energy on earth are sublated into two equiprimordial desires: the one to annul finitude through infinite power and productivity, the other to expend without reserve for the sake of unparalleled joy; it is neither one nor the other exclusively or essentially, but the site of their difficult and contradictory unity. "Mankind is at the same time...a manifold opening of the possibilities of growth and an infinite capacity for wasteful consumption".<sup>51</sup>

If artificial growth is by definition unnatural, it nevertheless occurs within the inviolable limits of the terrestrial space itself. Left unchecked, it results in a volatile pressurisation of the surplus energy that, absent a legitimate outlet for release, is doomed to be expended violently or "catastrophically". In such cases we "*undergo*

<sup>47</sup>See Bataille, *Accursed Share I*, 21.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>49</sup>Bataille, *Accursed Share II/III*, 199. Also: "Beyond need, the object of human desire is, humanly, the miracle; it is sovereign life, beyond the necessity that suffering defines...[a] miracle to which the whole of humanity aspires..." (*ibid.*, 200).

<sup>50</sup>Bataille, *Accursed Share I*, 37.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 181. See also *Erotism*, 40, and *Accursed Share II/III*, 18.

what we could *bring about* in our own way” – we suffer passively what we ought to command sovereignly – in the process relinquishing the very substance of our humanity.<sup>52</sup> Equilibrium is restored, albeit traumatically rather than exuberantly. Capitalism, for Bataille, speaking now in general rather than restricted terms, is a form of life defined by the subject’s near-total enslavement to artificial growth, the point at which a long-unfolding historical trajectory toward saving and investing and a concomitant repudiation of waste and loss reaches its apotheosis and end. Whereas “archaic” societies still managed to reserve times and places to indulge, however inadequately, in sumptuous modes of expenditure, capitalist society differs in that “prefers *an increase of wealth* to its immediate use”.<sup>53</sup> The central contradiction of such a system is that it generates ever more opportunities for squander – and for ever-more intense forms of squander – on the condition that they are instantly recaptured by and subordinated to the very logic that gives rise to them and that they are supposed to cancel.<sup>54</sup> The consequences of this are twofold. First, capitalism alienates us more than ever from “the substance of our aspirations”. “[Compared] to worlds gone by”, Bataille laments, ours is “hideous, and appears as the most failed of all”. The way in which “it was possible to lose oneself in ecstasy” is now “impossible in our world of educated vulgarity. The advantages of civilization are offset by the way men profit...in order to become the most degraded beings that have ever existed”.<sup>55</sup> Second, and by the same

token, the capitalist world is one in which the spectre of catastrophe hovers constantly and ever-more ominously over all aspects of life (a thesis that requires examples and empirical demonstration just as little today as it did in Bataille’s own time).

To conclude – and to bring the discussion back to the subject of disability – what Bataille advocates is by no means the overthrow of the capitalist order and a return to a need-based economy and correspondingly garish, archaic modes of expenditure. On the contrary, insofar as “humanity would cease to exist the day it became something other than what it is, entirely made up of violent contrasts”,<sup>56</sup> what he endorses is, for lack of a better word, a “dialectical” resolution whereby, as Habermas puts it, “a liberated mankind would make the reciprocal respect for the sovereignty of each by all into the moral foundation of common life”<sup>57</sup> – which is to say, one whereby a societal commitment to raising the living standard would facilitate the proliferation of occasions for sovereign modes of expenditure, while an equal commitment to sovereignty would in turn keep the system of production-for-production in homeostasis so as to facilitate the raising of the living standard, *in perpetuum*. And now to state what should be increasingly obvious: I would risk that the master term for all the various permutations of sovereignty is *disability*. Again, if one thinks of sovereignty as involving all manner of outlandish aesthetic stunts à la a Gary Fisher or a Bob Flanigan, this will seem farfetched. If one realises that such behaviours (along with

<sup>52</sup>Bataille, *Accursed Share I*, 24.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, 118–19. For Bataille, archaic expenditure was inadequate because it was not “lucid”, i.e., it was still tied to “things”, and for this reason was primitive and cruel, mobilised to the ends of competition and glory rather than true generosity. The goal of the North American Indian *potlatch*, for example, was one of “humiliating, defying, and obligating a rival”. See Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, 121–2.

<sup>54</sup>“Capitalism did not entail the suppression of nonproductive expenditures: it curbed their movement first of all...then it gradually reduced them to consuming the products of capitalism.” See Bataille, *Limit of the Useful*, 62.

<sup>55</sup>Bataille, “The sacred conspiracy”, in *Visions of Excess*, 179. See also *Accursed Share I*, 137; *Accursed Share II/III*, 15; and *Limit of the Useful*, 64.

<sup>56</sup>Bataille, *Accursed Share II/III*, 18.

<sup>57</sup>Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 234.

mystical ecstasy) are merely the most intense manifestations of an itinerary whose other possible forms comprise, *inter alia*, laughter, tears, poetry, drama, play, intoxication, festivals, and similarly mundane practices, it seems much less so (what is a heavily inebriated man, for example, with his slurred speech, dulled senses, and stumbling gait, if not disabled?).<sup>58</sup> But even this is to go too far. For at bottom, sovereignty is nothing other than *the conscious refusal of utility* – of power, mastery, productivity, ability – and the *enjoyment* of this refusal for what it is *tout court*. Bataille could not be clearer on this point: “the sovereign attitude is exemplified by the use of the surplus for nonproductive ends”.<sup>59</sup> Again: “What is sovereign is in fact to enjoy the present time without having anything else in view but this present time”.<sup>60</sup> And again, and still more plainly: “we may call sovereign the enjoyment of possibilities that utility doesn’t justify (utility being that whose end is productive activity). Life beyond utility is the domain of sovereignty”.<sup>61</sup> It cannot be stressed enough that there is absolutely nothing exhibitionistic, physically or mentally, in any of this; the goal is simply a society in which the base value of utility in all its myriad forms (productivity, creativity, the proliferation of novel “desiring-connections”...) is balanced by an equally intense commitment to the value of literally *wasting away*. And lest one counter that the reference to “consciousness” evidences a residual ableism, it should be stressed that Bataille is not asking disabled *people*, whether individually or as a community, to *do* anything at all, at least not *on account of* their disability; he is saying neither that people whom capitalist society marginalises as useless, a drain on the productive forces, are capable of a higher enjoyment on account of this very

uselessness, nor that it is the responsibility of such people to reclaim and reassert the value of uselessness (failure, loss, degradation...) for themselves. Rather he is offering a vision of a certain reconfiguration of modern life, one in which disability would no longer be an othering other but a regulative ideal, an impossible *goal*, and not “only” for people with disabilities but for *everyone* – *including* people with disabilities, who are no less a “unity of violent contrasts” than anyone else. So far from valorising the disabled body specifically by affirming it as (in terms reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari) “interconnected and productive”,<sup>62</sup> we should rather – all of us – accept, and commit ourselves to obeying, two reciprocal and mutually reinforcing duties: to do more than what we can and less than what we cannot.

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<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, 230–1.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, 284 (see also 281).

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, 199.

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**Correspondence:** Andrew Tyler Jorn, e: [atylerjorn@gmail.com](mailto:atylerjorn@gmail.com).

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